

THE PLASTIC FLOWER*

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Mrs. Handcock snapped awake and silenced the raucously buzzing alarm. She lay back again and looked over at Mr. Handcock. He was still sleeping gracelessly. His hair was standing up, his mouth was hanging open, soft snoring sounds came from his throat. "Gracious," she thought. "How gauche. I'm glad I don't look like that when I sleep." She wandered into the kitchen, plugged in the percolator, then wandered back into the bedroom and shook the sleep from her husband. While waiting for him to fully wake up, she went into the adjoining bathroom, and with the skill born of years of practice, she quickly put on her face. Mr. Handcock looked at her as she came out. Often he remarked on how nice she always looked in the morning.

After a hectic hour, she managed to get her husband and children off to work and to school. She certainly was glad that Brendonwood School could afford its own fleet of school buses. It would have meant considerable inconvenience to have to drive the seven blocks to take the children to class each day and then pick them up again. This way she was free to devote more time to her civic activities.

This afternoon she was expected to attend an important meeting of the Ladies' League for American Society. A few young black people were coming in from the ghetto to talk to the ladies. She would have to dress appropriately for this occasion. That new pantsuit would do marvelously. It was very young looking, very now, very today. With it she would wear her lovely suede boots. After she was dressed, she surveyed herself in the full-length mirror. Ah, the effect was perfect. The young image came through; it was probably the boots that did it.

Driving to the clubhouse, she thought over how beautifully laid out the community of Brendonwood Bluff was. Everything had been planned and landscaped faultlessly, unlike the nearby city, where everything was so willy-nilly. She entered the meeting house conscious that she looked right, even down to her figure. It was a very nice figure, considering her forty-one years. She watched her weight and had only a little bit of flabbiness, but that her long-line bra and all-day girdle could disguise.



While they waited for the guests to arrive, the women discussed the last episode of *All in the Family*. They wondered how Archie could down-grade the Jews so. Of course, the race did have its bad points, but one really should look for the virtues in people. The Jews were, after all, industrious, shrewd, and thrifty, and those traits could not be considered faults.

The black youths arrived, and the meeting came to order. This was really not a meeting. It was more of a rap session between the ladies and the ghetto people. They talked about slum conditions. Mrs. Handcock said that she thought more parks and recreation centers should be built. That would keep the kids off the streets and out of trouble. One of the visiting girls, whose name was Emily, gazed at Mrs. Handcock. On the subject of busing, Mrs. Handcock declared that, in the long run, it was a good thing. Segregation had to be ended. She would be happy to send her children to a public school, but there were just no good ones in Brendonwood Bluff. Emily stared at her. She then said that at least in her husband's firm, there was no discrimination. If a Negro applied for work, he was given careful consideration. If he had the qualifications, he would surely be hired and could even work his way up to a position of responsibility. Seeming to look right through Mrs. Handcock, Emily quietly asked,

"Who are you?"

"Marilyn Handcock," she replied, surprised.

"Who?"

"I'm . . . Marilyn Handcock," she repeated uncomfortably. She averted the girl's penetrating eyes.

Mrs. Handcock was glad when the meeting was over. It had been an important meeting and quite significant, but those young slum people had made her very uneasy. She was relieved to get out.

It did not bother her that it would be past six o'clock by the time she got home. Her husband and children would already have been home for some time. She would have to think of something quick and easy for dinner before she got there. Oh yes, she had some chicken pot pies in the freezer. They would do fine.

Mrs. Handcock's evening was uneventful. After dinner, she finally managed to finish *The Invisible Man*. "How very profound," she said to herself as she closed the book. "I wonder how many of the ladies have already read this." She would have to remember to bring it up at the next League meeting.

By then it was time for bed. She took a quick bath, then tiredly creamed her face off. She shook two Sominex from the bottle, gulped them down, and climbed into bed next to Mr. Handcock, who was already sleeping peacefully. With her sleep mask in place, Mrs. Handcock quickly became drowsy and slid off into slumber.